

DIGITAL LABOR

The Internet as Playground and Factory

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CONSIDERATIONS ON A HACKER MANIFESTO

McKenzie Wark

Here in the overdeveloped world, the bourgeoisie is dead. It neither rules nor governs. Power is in the hands of what I called the vectoralist class. Where the old ruling class controlled the means of production, the new ruling class has limited interest in the material conditions of production, in mines and blast furnaces and assembly lines. Its power rests not on the ownership of such things but in control of the logistics by which they are managed.

Vectoral power has two aspects: intensive and extensive. The intensive vector is the power of calculation. It is the power to model and simulate, but not only that. It is the power to monitor and calculate. And it is also the power to play with information, to turn it into poetry and narrative. The extensive vector is the power to move information from one place to another. It is the power to move and combine anything and everything as a resource. Again, this power has not just a rational meaning but also a poetic one.

Vectoral power can thus dispense with much of the machinery of the old capitalist ruling class. It is a matter of indifference who actually owns a furnace or an assembly line. The vectoral class contracts out such functions. The rise of the manufacturing industry in China and of the service industry in India is not the sign, then, that these underdeveloped states are joining the capitalist developed world. Rather, they now confront an overdeveloped world ruled by vectoral power.

The vectoral class is united only in desiring a world free from the compromises with labor that its capitalist predecessor was obliged to make. For all its tragedies, the twentieth century was the century of socialism—but its victories were mostly confined to the West. In the West, labor fought capital to a draw. Capital was obliged to concede to a substantial socialization of the surplus. We got free education, health care, the vote, and the emancipation of women. The tenets of the *Communist Manifesto* were indeed realized—in the West. This is the compromise that is now unraveling.

The vectoral class has few fixed assets. It tries to avoid actually owning factories. It avoids paying wages directly. It has less and less interest in the viability of national spaces of production and consumption. Fordism is dead.¹ What the vectoral class desires is a relationship with the world in which the world makes its body totally available in exchange for no commitments at all. Which is perhaps why the cultural form that best explains vectoral power is pornography.

And yet the vectoral class is not coherent in its strategies and interests. It has at least two factions. The vectoralist class as a whole we could describe as a military entertainment complex. What distinguishes its two factions is that while one pursues entertainment as a military strategy, the other pursues military strategy as entertainment. Between them is what William Gibson, in his novel *Spook Country*, calls the cold civil war.²

What we see playing out on the surface of U.S. politics in the early twenty-first century is the surface effect of this cold civil war. One faction is interested only in the strategies of resources. It thinks it acquired in Iraq the last untapped source of oil and natural gas and tried to build the logistical infrastructure to secure it. Far from being a failure, its Iraq adventure has proven a complete success. It never had any interest in Iraq as a democracy. In many ways, the more unstable it is, the better. The bases being built are to secure the oil, not the people.

The other faction within the vectoralist class is increasingly worried about the costs of this strategy, however. Its interest is not in the strategies of nature but in the logistics of second nature. Its business is the business of coordinating all aspects of life under the power of the brand, the patent, and the copyright. If capitalist power reduced being to having, then vectoralist power reduces having to appearing.³ The actual qualities of things become secondary to the logistics and poetics that decorate the commodity.

This faction of the vectoralist class confronts quite different issues. The dematerialization of the commodity threatens to undermine the very principle of the scarcity of value. As soon as digital technology perfected the separation of information as content from material form, the way was open for a massive socialization of cultural material. To some extent, this took the vectoral class by surprise. It did not quite occur to them that private property is not the natural form of culture.

We are witnessing a massive, nameless, faceless social movement, which takes the raw material of commodified culture and turns it back into common property. And the good news is that this movement has essentially won. After centuries of privatization, culture is ours again. This victory is partial and limited, of course, just as the victor of socialism in the West was limited. It only applies to culture and not to many of the other aspects of vectoral power. But, still, it is worth celebrating.

Politics now for the vectoralist class is the politics of attempting to recommodify some aspect of the value of culture, to make it scarce and rare again. Consider the politics of Apple's iPod, which attempted to make a fetish object of the device.

Or Facebook, where the proposition is that we should all entertain each other and put up with advertising merely for this privilege. Far from being a step forward, such media are a decadent form of the “society of the spectacle.” Not only are we to passively consume these images, we have to make them ourselves.

The model here is to reduce the paid labor force in the production of images as close as possible to zero and pay them only in the currency of recognition. We have to pay for the privilege of producing our own spectacle. The power of the vectoral class retreats from the direct ownership of the cultural product but consolidates around the control of the vector. We get all the culture; they get all the revenue.

Parts of the vectoral class are heading in quite the opposite direction—to completely closed, proprietary worlds. Online gaming is usually like this. In a game like the popular *World of Warcraft*, you pay for the privilege of laboring to acquire objects and status that are only artificially scarce.⁴ And you never get to own them. They remain private property. You rent back the product of your own labor. *World of Warcraft* is the nullity of the commodity economy perfected. *World of Warcraft* is the fantasy version of the power of the vectoral class perfected. You pay to rent everything, and they can deport you at any time.

Caught between the social movement that tries to liberate information and that faction of the vectoral class that seeks to control it is the hacker class. Anyone who labors for someone else producing so-called intellectual property is a hacker. It’s an ambivalent class. On the one hand, we depend on the vectoral class, who own the means of realizing the value of what we produce. On the other hand, we hardly profit from private property in information. If anything, it is a fetter on our own productivity.

I first proposed the idea of the hacker class in 2000, and in the intervening years have repeatedly been told that even if it exists, it can never become conscious of itself as a class. But frankly, I think the recent politics of information bears out the thesis. The hacker class does not march down the boulevard behind red banners on May Day. But it is fully capable of organizing around net neutrality, creative commons, open publishing in science, challenging stupid and harmful patents, and so on. The contemporary equivalent of the trade union consciousness of the old labor movement has well and truly arrived. It even has its vanguard, although an anonymous one.

Andrew Ross dismisses the projects of the hacker class as those of a “thwarted technocratic elite whose libertarian worldview butts up against the established proprietary interests.”⁵ There is some truth to that. However, if one were to look with too cold an eye at the practices of organized labor in the United States, one might come up with an equally cynical take. There’s always a gap between what a class is in practice and what it could make of itself.

It’s a question of pushing the often local or issue-based approach to hacker class consciousness into an entire worldview, or rather, worldviews. The challenge is to think the whole social totality from our point of view—to imagine worlds in

which our own interests and the interests of the people are aligned. The way to do this, I think, is to push beyond the compromise formations of things like creative commons. What would it mean not to liberalize intellectual property but to conceive of the world without it altogether? What would it mean to really think and practice the politics of information as something that is not scarce and has no owners?

It's important, I think, to cultivate a studied indifference to the cooption of our movement by compromise formations, which offer limited liberties but leave the ownership and control of the vector in the hands of the vectoralist class. No good tactic goes unrecovered, not least those of the most extreme of avant-gardes, the situationists. According to Christine Harold, "Perhaps this is because, like all good brands, situationism is easily appropriated towards new ends." Yet sometimes what looks like bankrupt tactics prove themselves again later, and what look like serious, professional, and mature developments of a movement can end up collapsing under their own weight. There is still a role for an avant-garde that has left the stale forms of art and politics behind and that confronts the emerging forms of power of our time with the possibility that they, too, will pass.

It was a sign of the times, of the strength of the free culture movement, that when the musicians Radiohead were released from their contract with EMI in 2007 they offered their new album *In Rainbows* via the Internet for fans to purchase at the price of their own choosing. You could even choose to pay zero pounds and zero pence, and still have it. There's a certain understanding of the gift implied in this. The gift always creates obligations in the receiver. If I sell you something, I am obliged to you. I must provide the goods and services to which we agreed. If I give you something, you are obliged to me—or at least are under a weak and very general obligation to return the gift, somewhere, to someone. Radiohead understood this. The gift of the new album created publicity, goodwill, future concert ticket sales, and even the gift of money. Many fans really want to pay for their music, but to pay as a gift because they want to honor an obligation, not because they are being forced to pay or risk legal sanctions for alleged theft or piracy.

But the limit to making a gift of culture to everyone is that doing so adds value to the vector through which it is distributed, and that is not free. The more forward-thinking strategy of the vectoral class is to retreat to this stronghold but to insist on it. This is why I suggest that free culture be considered a tactic rather than an end in itself. I think the hacker practice is to keep asking questions about property rather than just settle on one model.

An example might be what I call copygift.⁶ Besides copyright there is copyleft, but both copyright and copyleft take the property form for granted. Copyleft is the dialectical negation of intellectual property. It turns it against itself. But perhaps there are other, nondialectical strategies, not for opposing intellectual property but for escaping it. What if, rather than giving one's culture to everyone in the abstract but no one in particular, one made it always a particular gift to particular people?

This would be more like the model of a chain letter, for example. Long before the Occupy Wall Street movement, occupation literature circulated, and in the curious form of PDF files. They were designed to be transmitted, if not hand to hand, then e-mail to e-mail, to not be too readily searchable and retrievable by just anybody.

Of course, vectoral power is already here. It is called viral marketing. The game is to imagine other uses to which such a strategy can be put—and to go beyond, to invent new kinds of relations. Who knows what a relation can be? We haven't seen anything yet.

Lastly, I want to caution against three of the common modes of self-understanding that we have accepted a little too willingly without thinking it through. The first is the romance of the pirate.⁷ We are not pirates; we are hackers. And the distinction is this: The pirate is someone who takes another's property. Pirates take what does not belong to them. There is a romantic side to the pirate, but it is the romance of transgression. A transgression that, of course, mostly confirms the very notion of property in the act of coveting the property that belongs to another.

Call it what you like. If not hacking, then something else. But not piracy. The pirate takes another's property. The hacker makes something new out of property that belongs to everyone in the first place. Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains. The figure of the pirate draws attention to the chains. The figure of the hacker insists that information is in its very being something that is free, that always escapes the property form. It is where we are and remain social beings. It is where, far from being on the run or in retreat, the game is only just begun.

Not that the persona of the pirate is without its uses. In 2011, the Pirate Party won seats in Berlin's municipal elections on a platform that combined support for a guaranteed minimum income with the legalization of drug use and sophisticated positions on information rights.⁸ However, the future of progressive politics in the overdeveloped world may lie in a range of experiments in combining the interests of labor and the interests of the hacker class broadly defined—that is, if politics can be said to exist outside of the use of the vector for marketing purposes.

Second, I want to caution against the rhetoric of gamification. This could most broadly be conceived of as getting people to do things without paying them by offering them symbolic rewards in exchange. These rewards appeal by being rare and by being stratified. You can distinguish yourself by winning this symbolic token, which is ranked in relation to a whole hierarchy of such tokens.

Superficially, this seems like the logic of the gift economy. You do something for nothing because you want to do it, not as labor grudgingly offered in exchange for wages or other incentives but for fun, as "playbor." The difference is that the gift is not to another, and not via another to the commons in general, and the reward is not recognition by others making the same gifts. Rather, what is offered is a bit of cognitive energy that performs a task some vectoral business requires, and the reward is only a formal and abstract kind of token and ranking. It is not

the gift economy; it is a simulation of it. It isn't play that creates its own games; it is a game that extracts labor in the form of play.

Gamification broadly conceived is the strategy of the vectoral class at its most sophisticated. It no longer cares all that much about mere images or stories or tunes as intellectual property. But that does not mean it has given up on property! Its interest, rather, is in two things. First, in its proprietary algorithms for managing networks. Second, in the data that can be extracted from those networks and that remains resolutely proprietary. In short, the vectoral class has brought the fabled general intellect into material existence and is doing its best to make it private property. The struggle moves onto a whole new terrain.

Finally, the concept of the social factory. This has always seemed to me to relate to the special case quality of Italy in the seventies. Italy was the last major European country to shift its economy away from industrial labor processes. The struggles of that time were less a foretaste of what was to come for the rest of the overdeveloped world as a throwback to what had already passed.

Indeed, it can be hard to find people in the overdeveloped world who have any idea of what factory labor was like. In these parts of the world, the factory is no longer the dominant form of the experience of labor, and hasn't been for a while. Rather than social factory, it might make sense to talk of the monetized boudoir. What were formerly qualities of private, affective, and intimate life are now the kinds of labor that can be commodified. One needs to present well, even to make coffee or sell shoes, not to mention negotiate the social maze of the office or take meetings that will result in temp contracts.

But one thing the Italian experience really did identify that permeates the overdeveloped world, particularly for young people, is precarity. Working conditions become temporary, with few or no benefits. Only a tiny handful of employees are to be considered permanent. Everyone else is just hired hands, or rather hands, eyes, brains, and so on.

In such conditions, the question arises as to whether making labor more secure and rewarded or extending the social compact is the better strategy. It's a question with two dimensions. Which is more tactically feasible, but also which is more desirable in the first place? Do we want to focus on labor, and securing life through labor? Or do we want to secure the conditions of life itself?

It is hard not to be pessimistic about both options. And it is also hard to argue against any and every opportunity that people might find to secure life against commodification wherever they can find it. But taking a step back, perhaps there's something to be said for the struggle to secure the conditions of life directly.

It is still something of a wake-up call for educated people in the overdeveloped world: what we do has finally been proletarianized. Logics of what Stiegler calls grammatization, or what I call abstraction, extend now to formerly white-collar and professional tasks. Meanwhile, information has escaped its embeddedness in any given materiality and can now be easily transferred from one material expression to another. The whole basis of an economy that sold information strapped to

particular things has simply vanished, despite the efforts of the old culture industry to artificially restore it.

Given those two conditions, restoring the prestige of intellectual endeavor seems as vain a project as restoring the privileges of the old craft guilds. All that is solid melts into air. After the era of cheap things comes the era of cheap information.

That seems to me to shift attention to securing the conditions of life directly rather than indirectly as a reward for labor. Any particular labor for any particular firm or industry is always vulnerable, not least to competition now from the developing world. So why not struggle instead for securing life? We will consent to labor if we have to, or if we feel like it, but demand the right to live, to love, to create, to play, to struggle—to make the best of everyday life. We demand a living wage for all. We demand free education for all. We demand free health care for all. We demand universal access to the infrastructure of life in all its forms. The rest we will make for ourselves.

Notes

- 1 See the classic presentation by Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation* (London: Verso, 2001).
- 2 William Gibson, *Spook Country* (New York: Putnam, 2007).
- 3 To paraphrase Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 17.
- 4 Julian Dibbell, *Play Money* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
- 5 Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 175.
- 6 See McKenzie Wark, "Copyright, Copyleft, Copygift," *Open* no. 12 (2007), skor.nl. Also available at <http://meanland.com.au/articles/post/copyright-copyleft-copygift>.
- 7 Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
- 8 "The New Rebels," *Spiegel Online International*, September 19, 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-new-rebels-germany-s-pirate-party-celebrates-historic-victory-a-787044.html>.